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# A PLEA FOR OUR NATIVE ART

By NATALIE CURTIS

**I**N the city of Santa Fe, seat of the Archæological Institute of America where the old Palace of the Spanish Governors enshrines the prehistoric pottery excavated from the ruins and cliff-dwellings strewn throughout New Mexico, a New Museum has been dedicated to contemporary art and to the social and cultural life of the Southwest. To many of the visitors from afar the most significant feature of the three days dedication was the performance by Indians of a symbolic dance—the Dance of the Eagles, from the Pueblo of San Ildefonso, accompanied by native singers with drums.

It seemed indeed fitting that the museum, whose architecture reflects the old missions built by the padres in the pueblos, should echo to the voice of the ancient peoples of the Rio Grande. And those who saw the dance and heard the music are asking why it is that America, who welcomes dancers from Russia and from India, Irish and Japanese players, and folk-music from all over the world, should remain deaf and blind to the drama and song of prehistoric America lying right at our door? The symbolic dance of the American Indian is an art both dignified and noble, as beautiful as the static arts of Indian decoration and design; while the music of the pueblos, still untouched by European influence, is as archaic and typically racial in expression as are the pots and baskets hoarded in museums all over the world as priceless treasures.

Is our ignorance of the value of plastic Indian arts due to the past policy of our Government which sternly set its face against all things Indian believing that by stamping out everything pertaining to the native life the red man would be “civilized”? No “Huns” in Europe have destroyed art more deliberately and systematically than we in our own land, for the aboriginal race suffers a spiritual annihilation at our hands as ruthless as physical extermination. Though pueblo culture has still survived to a surprising degree, one generation of Anglo-Saxon influence will do more to kill the art of the Rio Grande than did three centuries of Spanish contact.

How rare, how valuable is that art, the colony of American painters at Taos and Santa Fe will testify. Indian music enshrines not only the religious ritual of the people, but also the whole unwritten literature of the race. In the song-poems of the Southwest lies a great enrichment of American letters, for the imagery is not only strikingly original and beautiful but like pueblo music (which seems the child of the wind, for through it sings great Nature herself) the poems, too, are born of natural environment. The woman grinding corn who sings at dawn, "The Sun-Youth and his brethren now go forth from the East—go we forth with them!" links the art of the Indian with the surrounding world of cosmic forces. For like the Hindoos, whose "ragas" or scales belong each to certain times or seasons, so with the American Indian, there are songs for different times of day and for chosen periods of the year. Indeed it is impossible for a white man to realize the importance of art in the life of the red man, for there is scarcely a task, light or grave, scarcely an event, great or small, but has its fitting song.

As the great need of the agricultural people of the Southwest is rain, a wealth of unusual poetic figure clusters around the songs and dances which are mostly prayers for the longed-for waters. In a corn-grinding song from the Pueblo of Zuñi, the Rainbow is likened to a beautiful youth "brightly decked and painted," while the birds call the clouds with their song and the swallow flies to tell the fields the "glad news" of coming rain. Then the corn-plants murmur: "We are growing everywhere! Hi-yai—the world, how fair!"

In the Dance of the Eagles, performed by two male dancers against a frieze of bright-clad singers with their drums, the Eagle is also conceived as a messenger of rain, for birds are sky people, one with the clouds, which to the Indian imagination are like giant wings from whose movement fall the welcome drops. So we find on even prehistoric pottery, bird and wing patterns along with more obvious rain-designs, and the whole Eagle-Dance is a great dramatized rain-symbol. With some tribes this dance is performed in the spring, at the birth of all young life, and with the coming of the first green. On the Rio Grande, the opening song shows us in the lilt of the music and in the tilt of the dancers' wings, the old eagles teaching the young to fly. There are only two eagles in the dance, and though much of the meaning of the ancient rite has now been lost, without doubt this duality corresponds to the symbolism of the Plains Indians who see in the two eggs of the eagle the meaning of all life which springs from

# Fragments of One of the Ancient Traditional Chants from the Eagle Dance-Drama

**Figure I** (Entrance of the Eagles)

*In very moderate time and with  
great rhythmic dignity*

Recorded at  
San Ildefonso Pueblo  
New Mexico, by  
Natalie Curtis



**Figure II** (The Eagles tilt and tip their wings)



**Figure III** (The Eagles lift high their wings and soar, dancing)

*Faster*



\* Notes tied with a stress marc above them indicate a curious rhythmic pulsing of tone, characteristic in Indian music, and analogous in sound to stressed notes played with a single bow-stroke on the violin.

two elements: male and female. In the middle of the dance comes a song with words framed in four verses symbolic of the four world-quarters, designated by four mountains which bound the horizon of the village of San Ildefonso. Near these mountains stand the game, colored to Pueblo fancy with the color-symbolism which indicates North, West, South and East: the black chief of the elk, the yellow deer-chief, the red antelope-chief, and the white buffalo-chief—the game, almost as necessary to Indian life as the rain that brings the Mother-Corn. In the last song the movement of the dancers depicts the circling of the eagles in upward flight, and then their soaring through space on broad wing till they pass out of sight and are flown away.

The art of modern painters offers scarcely a finer sense of accent on essentials and subordination of detail than does the costume of the eagle-dancers. Even as in decoration and design the Indian rarely depicts facts or paints realities, but suggests *ideas*, so whenever an animal is portrayed whether on decorated pot or in ritualistic dance, the characterizing features are chosen (if a bird, then wing, beak and tail-feathers) and of these the Indian fashions a design which is primarily *design*. So in the Eagle-Dance the bird is not actually represented, but indicated with a poetic and imaginative appeal. A beaked cap of eagle-down, a straight row of feathers falling from the outspread arms like wings, a few tail-feathers fastened to a buck-skin kilt, color-notes in paint, yellow and red, flat and decorative as Chinese art, these make the bird-symbols. As we saw the lithe, athletic forms (the throat and neck painted feathery-white with a necklace of eagle-down, the body black) we thought of our own production of "Chantecler," when actors and actresses were nothing but huge, stuffed toys whose absurd literalness robbed even Rostand's verse of poetry. The theatrical manager gave us hundreds of dollars worth of feathers as advertised: the Indian offers nothing less than the sublimated *spirit* of the bird.

In this æsthetic restraint, in this quality of selection, the Indian is a true artist. For the Eagle-Dance is design and sculpture in motion, while the music shows the same discriminating austerity and dignity. On the symmetrical structure of his ceremonial songs (introduction, verses, refrains and coda), on the severe sculptural outline of the melody, and on the dynamic beauty and variety of rhythms does the Indian build his music; for harmony in the modern sense has no place in the conception of this nature-people whose voices are but a human part of the harmonies of nature. The appeal of Indian music, like all Indian

art, is through suggestion; and herein our West meets East and the Indian clasps hands with the Japanese.

The war, with its hideous revelation of barbarism, may at last teach us of the white race that we are not so far ahead of the darker races as we thought. We have fought for the rights of small nations; let us also fight at home for rights not political merely, but spiritual and cultural as well—the right of the American Indian to *be himself*; to express his own ideals of beauty and fitness in his religion, his customs, his dress and in his art; above all, his right to have some voice, some part in the educating and upbringing of his own children. Even as our museums gather examples of the ancient decorations and designs unearthed by the archæologist, let our guardians of culture do now—before it is too late—something for *living* Indian art. May the Dance of the Eagles performed at the New Museum in New Mexico be the forerunner of a definite movement to preserve and encourage native art, not only in collections, but where it has dwelt in the past and should continue to be—in the life of the Indian and of all our people, to-day. We who look to Europe for art-inspiration might well turn our eyes to our own Far West with the cry, “America First!”